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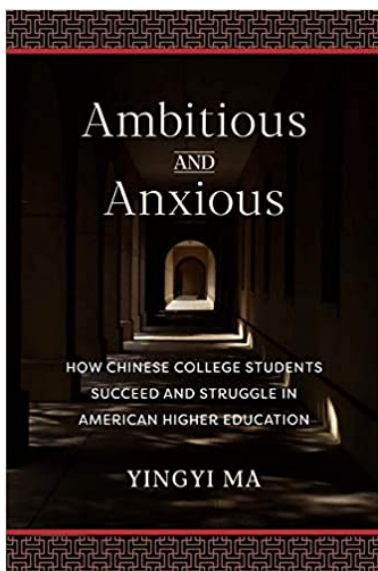
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Ambitious and Anxious: How Chinese College Students Succeed and Struggle in American Higher Education

Ma, Y., 2020, Columbia University Press

Reviewed by Minghui Hou, *Old Dominion University, USA*



In this new publication, Syracuse University Associate Professor Yingyi Ma employs a mixed-method research design to examine and analyze the educational motivations, experiences, and trajectories of a new wave of Chinese undergraduate students from diverse family backgrounds with an emphasis on “the duality of ambition and anxiety” (p. 7). This book challenges the stereotyped expectations of Americans in regard to Chinese students (for instance, that all are from well-off families and have poor English skills). Ma argues that it is pivotal to consider the educational, social, and cultural backgrounds of Chinese internationals in their processes of self-formation in order to have a well-rounded and diverse understanding of Chinese undergraduate students.

The first two chapters present a broad and varied picture of undergraduates being both ambitious and anxious. These Chinese learners are ambitious about pursuing higher education at prestigious American institutions, gaining a global outlook, selecting the right major for achieving their goals, combining the merits of American and Chinese education, and their eventual contributions to China or the United States. Meanwhile, they are anxious about the complicated and

unknown American institutions' admission processes, tensions within different fields, new expectations in American classrooms, as well as both competition in China and the anti-immigrant environment in America. Ma also identifies the following reasons for Chinese undergraduates studying abroad as *education gospel*: good quality of education, future career development, cosmopolitan capital, and disappointment with Chinese Gaokao and education systems.

In Chapter 3 Ma explores four pathways of Chinese students studying in the United States:

1. From regular classes in Chinese public schools to American colleges
 2. From international classes in Chinese public schools to American colleges
 3. From Chinese private schools to American colleges
 4. From high schools in America, usually private, to American colleges
- (Ma, 2020, p. 54)

These four pathways are economically stratified (from least to most cost) with 80% of study participants pursuing the first two pathways. This chapter focuses on the influences of economic status and parental education on international educational trajectories, for example the use of agents in college applications as well as the *DIY* (do it yourself) avenue. The former plays an important role given agents' institutional connections and their potential role as mentors. However, there is also dissatisfaction with agents due to lack of communication and transparency.

In Chapter 4, Ma examines Chinese students' insights on Chinese and American education: creativity, critical thinking, ability- and effort-based learning mindsets, attitudes toward math, the disconnection between precollege and college experiences, and academic integrity. She argues that Chinese education focuses on standardized curriculum, conformity, and rote learning, whereas American education focuses on critical thinking and creativity, which she frames as including "multiplistic thinking," "truth seeking and challenging authority," and "emphasizing process over outcome" (p. 84). Ma argues that Chinese students tend to put more effort into studying than their American peers, and further that they are influenced by Confucianism to be obedient to professors. This reflects Stevenson and Stiger's belief that Chinese individuals emphasize effort as driving their learning, whereas American students focus more on innate ability. In Chapter 6, this is connected to the selection of majors, with Ma arguing that collectivism and pragmatism informed by the views of parents and teachers may support Chinese students' selection of STEM fields.

Chapters 5 and 7 focus on the issues Chinese students have encountered in sociocultural and academic interactions. Ma explores two primary issues: Chinese students' dissatisfaction with their lives (internal) and unmet desired benefits for international and domestic students for institutions (external). Ma explores the rationales for the issues: students' exclusion from American peer groups due to neo-racism and "the voluntary withdrawal" into Chinese groups due to disappointment with the American economy and individualistic culture (p. 111). Ma's research resonates with Lee and Rice's (2007) study on neo-racist

stereotypes about Asians, in which Chinese students were considered loud and perceived as only making friends with other Chinese students. I would argue that the neo-racist stereotypes have become worse during the pandemic under the Trump administration. As for academic interactions, such as a lack of speaking up in the classroom, Ma identifies the English language barrier as the primary rationale, premigration characteristics and institutional types as micro-contextual rationales, and cultural differences as well as test-oriented educational system as macrocontextual rationales. These two chapters are one of the few contributions in the relevant literature to bring a holistic understanding of Chinese students' sociocultural and academic experiences in a neo-racist context.

In Chapter 8 three themes related to Chinese students' reflections on their courses of study are explored: global citizenship, attitudes toward China and the United States, and personal transformation. One key assertion is that the development of global citizenship strengthens students' interest and affinity with China, whereas it leads to criticisms of American government and institutions. Students become more autonomous, independent, proactive, and reflective, which sometimes causes tensions and conflicts with their parents. Ma's findings support the notion that American higher education is an important source of soft power due to the transmission of American cultures and values to Chinese students.

Chapter 9 focuses on decision-making about the future among Chinese international students. Around 60% of the participants in Ma's study plan to return to China, but most intend to return within 1–3 years after graduation. Four nuanced patterns for future decisions are "returning to China, staying in the United States, traversing transnational places, and wavering hearts and changing plans" (p. 214). Ma explores the following rationales for returning to China: the Trump administration, the lure of family, American graduate school as a conduit, and better opportunities in China. For students wanting to stay in the United States, they prefer the American environment due to concerns about factors such as pollution and corruption in China.

Notable among the book's contributions is the exploration of different purposes and experiences of both privileged and less privileged students studying in the United States. While the former aim to maintain their socioeconomic status, less privileged students tend to achieve social mobility. For both groups of students, agents are important in the application process not only because of connections with American institutions but also given American holistic admissions, which tend to lead students to be enrolled in higher-ranked universities due to professional guidance and service. In addition, these groups of students have built a sense of agency in the process of self-formation while studying in the United States.

To conclude, this book provides significant contributions to the literature on students' selection of course of study, social integration, and transnational migration, as well as on policy discourse, including but not limited to college admissions, student affairs, faculty support, and career services. Ma draws on theoretical and empirical literature to highlight the new educational gospel for the new wave of Chinese international undergraduates in the context of rapid social, cultural, and economic development in China and uncertain geopolitical context

in the United States. Future research should examine student decision-making processes regarding study abroad given China-U.S. geopolitical tensions and experiences particularly during the pandemic, and what policies or supports should be provided in a particular institutional, regional, or global context.

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